

NY Post 11/17/70



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BUGGING THE GOVERNORS

WASHINGTON.

The most confidential conversations of the nation's Governors can be overheard at any point along an emergency telephone system that links their private offices with Civil Defense headquarters.

It has just been discovered that the red emergency telephones in most Governor's offices have been transformed into secret listening devices. The microphone in each receiver will pick up conversations in the room when the phone is on the hook.

I personally listened to a conversation that an electronics expert, using simple wiretap tools, easily picked up in the office of Maryland's Governor Marvin Mandel. The conversation was transmitted through the emergency telephone under the Governor's desk.

An estimated 30 Governors have similar phones that have been rigged for eavesdropping. These insidious phones connect into a hotline, which enables Civil Defense to have instant communications with the Governors in a national crisis.

The hotline, referred to in classified documents as "The Special Service Line for Civil Defense," is supposed to be strictly hush-hush. It is difficult, therefore, to get any official information.

From unofficial but reliable sources, however, this column has established the following facts:

The emergency phones were installed about 15 years ago as part of a secret network whose main terminal is located in Colorado Springs. The network links most Governors, who can be called simultaneously in case of an emergency.

The receivers were wired in such a way that they can pick up everything said in the Governors' offices. Some officials insist the wiring was an "innocent mistake." But electronics experts say flatly there was no possibility of a mistake. They say the phones must have been deliberately rigged to eavesdrop on the Governors.

Secrecy is used to cover up the identity of those responsible for transforming the Governors' phones into hidden mikes. Some officials say the phones were wired by the American Telephone and Telegraph Co. Others say the rigging was done by the federal government. AT & T would make no comment, except to say all information would have to come from the customers.

Even more mysterious is the identity of the listeners. Some think it must be the FBI. Others say the CIA is the most likely culprit.

Governor Mandel was the first to discover his emergency phone was bugged. He angrily summoned telephone officials and demanded to know who was responsible. This column got wind of his protest and questioned him.

He confirmed that an electronics specialist had checked the red phone under his desk and found it was wired to pick up every sound in the room.

He said his predecessor, Spiro Agnew, had discovered a hidden mike in the Governor's office before moving up to the Vice Presidency. As a result, Mandel began checking the office regularly for mikes and wiretaps after he moved in.

The red emergency phone had been ignored, he said, on the assumption that the secret hotline must be secure. But last month, a new electronics expert insisted upon checking it and demonstrated how the emergency phone functioned as a secret transmitter.

Outraged, he railed in the telephone people and made other confidential inquiries. He said the telephone officials not only acknowledged that his special phone was bugged but said all emergency phones were wired the same way. This would mean all the Governors on the hotline had bugged phones, they told him.

Mandel could hardly believe it. To satisfy himself, he arranged to send an electronics specialist to check the emergency phone of a neighboring Governor. Mandel said the Governor, whom he declined to identify, was also shocked to find how the phone transmitted all the conversations in the office.

Meanwhile, Mandel ordered the microphone removed from his emergency phone. He said the phone had never rung during his 22 months as Governor and probably hadn't been used since it was installed. But the day after he removed the microphone, the phone rang.

He happened to be out of the office, but his personal secretary, Grace Donald, confirmed to this column that there had been six short, sharp rings on the emergency phone. Since only the Governor is supposed to answer the hotline, she didn't pick up the phone.

I asked the Governor's permission to tap into the hotline to test for myself whether I could overhear what went on inside his office. He assigned Lt. Norval Cooper, a state trooper trained in electronics, to accompany me. The microphone was screwed back into the emergency phone, and Cooper used common wiretap tools to plug into the hotline at a nearby switchbox. Every word spoken in the Governor's office was distinctly audible. By using a voice-activated recorder, the full conversation could easily have been taped.